

Durham 911 Center Texting Trial for Emergency Help

Frequently Asked Questions

What is “text-to-911” technology?

Durham residents and visitors who are also Verizon Wireless customers can send a text message to 911 for emergency help as part of a six-month trial to test the potential of offering this new technology.

Since Verizon Wireless is the service provider participating in the trial, only Verizon Wireless customers will be able to send a text message to 911; all other wireless customers (such as AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, etc.) must continue to **call** 911 for emergency help.

Why is the City of Durham participating in a trial for “text-to-911” technology?

From now until January 31, 2012, the Durham Emergency Communications Center will accept 911 text messages from Verizon Wireless customers as part of a collaboration between the City of Durham, Verizon Wireless, and Intrado. Intrado, which is an emergency communications technology provider, has recently installed next-generation 911 software that enables text messaging in the Durham Emergency Communications Center.

The texting trial is specifically designed for two types of emergency scenarios. Since the way people communicate is evolving and 911 centers across the nation are evaluating how to adapt to the digital age, Durham wants to offer multiple ways for people to reach out to 911 when they need help.

When asked to participate in this trial, the Durham Emergency Communications Centers went into it as an opportunity to help people who are hearing impaired and potential victims who can't afford for someone to hear them make a 911 voice call.

How long will the trial period last?

From Wednesday, August 3, 2011 until January 31, 2012, the Durham Emergency Communications Center will accept 911 text messages from Verizon Wireless customers only.

What are the limitations of “text-to-911” technology?

Verizon Wireless customers in Durham should keep the following in mind if they send a text to 911 during the trial period:

- Customers should use the texting option only when calling 911 is not an option.

- It can take longer to receive a text message because someone must enter the text, the message then goes through the system, and the 911 telecommunicator must read the text and then text back. Picking up the phone and calling 911 is still the most efficient way to reach emergency help. Texting is not always instantaneous, which is critical during a life-threatening emergency.
- Providing location information and nature of the emergency in the first text message is imperative since the Durham Emergency Communications Center will not be able to access the cell phone location or speak with the person who is sending the text. Text abbreviations or slang should never be used so that the intent of the dialogue can be as clear as possible.
- Customers must be in range of cell towers in the Durham County area. If customers are outside or near the edge of the county, the message may not reach the Durham Emergency Communications Center.
- Texts sent to 911 have the same 160 character limit as other text messages.
- Verizon Wireless customers must have mobile phones that are capable of sending text messages. Any text message to 911 will count either against their messaging bundle or be charged at 20 cents each.
- At this point in the trial period, the messaging software pre-loaded onto the Droid from Motorola (original version) does not format text messages correctly when the digits “911” are entered as the “To” address. Installing the free “Verizon Messages” application for Droids (version 1.3.24a) from the Android Market fixes this issue.
- The texting function should only be used for emergency situations that require an immediate response from police, fire or emergency medical services. Non-emergency issues should still be communicated to the Durham Emergency Communication Center through its non-emergency line at (919) 560-4600.

Is Durham the first community in North Carolina to try this new technology?

The Durham Emergency Communication Center is the first 911 center in North Carolina, as well as the second 911 center in the United States, to enable “text-to-911” technology using 911 digits and live call takers. The first and only other 911 center currently using Intrado’s technology is Black Hawk County, Iowa.



What will the Durham Emergency Communications Center do when the trial period is over?

There can be limitations to sending an emergency text message and the Durham Emergency Communication Center, along with Verizon Wireless, wants to test and evaluate all of the aspects of “text-to-911” technology before any potential widespread implementation.

Given the interest and potential value of this technology, coupled with the needs of public safety, it is imperative that all scenarios during the trial period are thoroughly examined to see if this type of technology works and if any problems arise that must be corrected by Intrado before Verizon Wireless and other service providers work with public safety agencies to implement “text-to-911” on a widespread level.

Armed with the knowledge obtained from the trial in Durham, Verizon Wireless hopes to better understand the challenges and benefits of ‘text-to-911’ technology and determine if it’s something that it can provide for its customers in Durham and elsewhere.

What is next-generation 911 technology and how does it support “text-to-911” capabilities?

The recent installation of Intrado’s next-generation 911 technology is providing the Durham Emergency Communication Center with the building blocks necessary to the support additional services beyond text messaging, such as receiving cell phone pictures and video clips as well as advanced address intelligence.

The Durham Emergency Communications Center is the first center in North Carolina, and one of a relatively small number in the United States, to have next-generation 911 technology. The Center is now taking a giant step toward having capabilities that it’s never had before, such as working toward being able to accept cell phone images submitted by callers, which in turn can be used by police or fire departments to see the scene before they even arrive.

At the end of the day, the Center is going to be able to provide faster and better service, not only to Durham residents and visitors, but to emergency response departments as well. This text messaging trial is just the beginning.

How much are the “text-to-911” trial and the next-generation 911 software costing the City?

The “text-to-911” software trial period is at no cost to the Durham Emergency Communications Center.

The next-generation 911 technology upgrade, approved by City Council in September 2009, cost \$103,500 and was funded by the 911 Surcharge Revenue Fund.



If I need more information, where can I go?

- Visit the City's website at www.DurhamNC.gov/Departments/911
- Watch the August 2011 episode of "CityLife" on DTV8 (Time Warner Cable channel 8) or on demand at www.DurhamNC.gov/DTV8/CityLife.cfm
- Watch the August 5, 2011 episode of "City Hall This Week" on DTV8 or on demand at www.DurhamNC.gov/DTV8/CityHallThisWeek.cfm
- Contact Jim Soukup, director of the Durham Emergency Communications Center, at (919) 560-4191 or by e-mail at James.Soukup@DurhamNC.gov.